

Gianni Vattimo

Philosophy as Ontology of Actuality

A biographical-theoretical interview with
LUCA SAVARINO and FEDERICO VERCELLONE¹

Abstract: The following interview retraces the intellectual development of a leading contemporary thinker, from his early student years to his most recent interventions as a political philosopher, and includes a discussion of some of his most well-known and influential theoretical contributions, such as the notion of “weak thought” and his reflections on postmodernism. Gianni Vattimo presents his philosophy to the reader as an “ontology of actuality” which can only properly be understood in the light of the author’s Christian background and his unwavering interest in social and political questions.

Question: In his lecture courses, Heidegger supposedly liked to summarise the life of Aristotle by declaring simply that “Aristotle was born, worked, and died.” It would seem that your philosophy, in contrast, can hardly be understood independently of your Christian religious educational background on the one hand, and of your social and political engagement on the other. In your case it appears as if thought and biography effectively reflect one another?

Vattimo: When I look back over the past, I realise that my own biography has been very bound up with ideological matters. At the same time, my thought is a reflection of events: in some cases I have simply echoed issues and problems that were part of the general environment around me, part of the air I was breathing every day.

Question: Why don’t we begin at the beginning?

Vattimo: Well, I graduated from the Liceo Gioberti in 1954. And in the same year I enrolled at the University of Turin. At the same time I had to work to support myself, and even attempted to get a job in the insurance business (with Assicurazioni Generali). Fortunately, it turned out that they didn’t want

¹ We should like to thank Guido Brivio for having made available the text of his own previously unpublished interview with Gianni Vattimo, which we have used to expand upon certain passages in the following text.

me anyway, but I always used to try and justify myself with friends and family by pointing out that if Kafka himself had worked as an insurance salesman, then there was no reason why I couldn't do the same!

This early period of my education went hand in hand with various concrete projects and commitments. Together with Enrico Fubini, Giorgio Migliardi, and other classmates, I started a student newspaper called "Il Vitellone." I hit upon the name myself – I have always told colleagues that in any competition for titles I would inevitably come first, for I do really believe I am a great inventor of titles! This year also saw the emergence of the political student organisations, and with the two individuals I have mentioned, we more or less represented the Italian political spectrum of the time: I was a Catholic, Migliardi was an orthodox Communist, and a reader of *Società* (one of the most tedious and difficult journals of the period), while Fubini was a Jewish republican with a typically secular outlook, not that radically committed, but with an enlightened attitude to things – one could even say he was a modern representative of the "Enlightenment," and indeed still is.

My decision to study philosophy was largely a consequence of my religious commitment and my militant political attitude: it was a way of bringing religion and politics together without endorsing the "Christian Democrat" line. At the time I was very active in the inner workings of Catholic education, involved, on the one hand, with the "Lay Apostolate" and the militant programme of "Catholic Action," and on the other, with meetings with Petrus Caramello, a Monsignor from Turin who used to study Aquinas from morning till night, and probably all night too. I had also got to know Mazzantini who, being a Thomist, did not enjoy much support from Guzzo. This was the reason why he was a full professor in Genoa, but merely a lecturer in Turin, where he taught courses on the history of medieval philosophy.

After "Il Vitellone," I collaborated on a student journal entitled "Quarto d'Ora," a monthly publication which was directed by Michele Straniero and financially supported by "Catholic Action." I was simply the diocesan student representative, and the editorial work was performed by Straniero and Ennio Caretto, who later became the correspondent of *La Stampa* in New York and now lives in the United States. During my early years at the university I continued to remain a member of "Catholic Action," even though I was increasingly beginning to feel that my position was highly problematic in this respect. These were the years of internal struggle in "Catholic Action" between Gedda and Caretto. In 1952 Caretto specifically opposed what was known as "Operation Sturzo," an attempted alliance between the Christian Democrats and the MSI [Italian Social Movement] for acquiring control of local government in Rome. All of us – myself, Furio Colombo, Umberto Eco, and various others – naturally supported Caretto, who struck us as less

conservative, or less aligned with the Church hierarchy, in the name of a Christianity which I would define in terms of Maritain's general outlook: one imbued with a respect for the autonomy and intrinsic dignity of the terrestrial world. It was a Christianity strongly influenced by the French theology of the period, above all by Maritain and Congar, but also by Chenu and de Lubacs.

During my university years I also did some work in television, from 1954 until 1956, in fact, when the "Casa di Carità, Arti e Mestieri" offered me a position as teacher of Italian, religion and civic education. I remember that, given my extensive earlier studies of Thomist theology, I was able to offer religious courses on the *Summa Theologica* of Aquinas. The work was all very exciting, but they soon got rid of me because I had been taking the older students along with me to political demonstrations. In 1956, or perhaps it was 1957, I was arrested in front of the premises of Riv [the company *Rubinetterie Italiane Vellata*], where I had gone to picket during a strike, with a copy of the "Constitution" in my hand. I was there with Vittorio Rieser, they loaded all of us in the back of a police van and drove us away, then the Bishop intervened, explaining that we were just "good boys from Catholic Action," and we were released forthwith. Since the police were interrogating us one by one, and asking who had sent us there, Rieser suggested that we should say "we had received a vision of the Madonna in a dream and she had instructed us to join the picket." But I don't think anyone actually ventured this explanation after all!

Question: Do you remember when you first met Luigi Pareyson?

Vattimo: I made his acquaintance around the time of my second year at the university. Along with Marziano Guglielminetti, I used to participate in a group, of Catholic sympathies, which Cardinal Pellegrino had effectively gathered around him. It was there that I met Getto and Pareyson himself. At that time Pareyson enjoyed a considerable reputation which derived from the part he played with the partisans during the war. He had born arms, although I do not believe he had ever fired a shot. Pietro Chiodi also mentioned him in his book on the resistance, but in fact he never boasted about his role in any particular way. Pareyson was an atypical partisan in many ways: monarchist, legitimist, Catholic, all in all a bit of a "rare bird." It was no accident that he had been rather marginalised, in the culture of the Left, because he had quarrelled with the "Partito d'Azione," and he had little in common with the left wing atmosphere of Turin. Shortly before his death Pareyson published a book with Einaudi, whereas throughout his life he had always published with Mursia. It is difficult to say what his position would be today, politically speaking. In his final years he used to read "Il Giornale" of Montanelli. He would thus be a supporter of Montanelli, not Berlusconi, a somewhat disil-

lusioned liberal, non-statist and anti-bureaucratic in outlook. We must also remember that, from the political point of view, Pareyson always rejected the Catholic approach to mass movements, and regarded my own engagement in “Catholic Action” as a misjudgement. He was a liberal Catholic of individualistic outlook, and had no interest in becoming involved with the “Left” of Christian Democracy.

Question: Could you describe what it was like at that time, or tell us something about the general atmosphere of the faculty of philosophy in Turin? Was it marked by political conflicts and differences, or by bitter academic rivalries of one kind or another?

Vattimo: Apart from Pareyson, there was Nicola Abbagnano, who had a group of followers who were already extremely critical and secular in outlook. The divisions in the faculty were not primarily political in character, and former fascists and anti-fascists mingled with one another. Abbagnano had never strongly criticised fascism. On the contrary, although he had never been an activist for the movement, he had once written a book that reflected a kind of fascistic mysticism. Pareyson, on the other hand, was certainly not regarded as an irrationalist. The divisions were of a much more general ideological character, with some endorsing a neo-enlightenment perspective, while others supported the group which preferred an essentially hermeneutic approach.

In the University of Turin at this time the centre was represented by those involved in the “Centro di Studi Metodologico,” namely Guzzo, Abbagnano, Pareyson, Frola, Caruccio (who specialised in the history of mathematics), Barone (who was a student of Guzzo’s and a liberal). I believe that Guzzo never actually said a word about political questions. Indeed, when I first arrived at the university – and I was still a good Catholic, a believer who duly went to Mass every morning – I would often ask myself: what does Guzzo really believe in? I could never come up with an answer to my question. He was also a Catholic, of course, but he used to attend Mass in the Greek church. He never spoke openly about his faith, and his books essentially focussed on questions of morality: every human activity, according to him, involves certain form-giving processes, that is, effectively constructs the world of values, a world that would have no force if there was no such thing as “Value” with a capital V, so to speak. He thus defended a finalistic perspective, endorsing a teleology which bestows meaning on human activity as a whole. But the fundamental claim was precisely this notion of “form-giving.” To someone who did not know him personally, Guzzo might seem to resemble Ernst Cassirer, to be a kind of neo-Kantian follower of Giordano Bruno. Guzzo wrote a fine book on Bruno which was cited and praised, as I once saw, in Gadda’s journal

“Diario.” The real difference between Guzzo and Abbagnano is that the latter appealed above all to the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition and argued that we should concern ourselves primarily with the philosophy of language, with the philosophy of science, in short, with essentially methodological and epistemological questions; Guzzo, on the other hand, remained more faithful to the European, and thus also to the Italian, idealist tradition: he had, after all, been a student of Giovanni Gentile, and had spoken of his personal contact with Benedetto Croce, of the occasion when he had gone to meet the latter, at the end of a period when he had himself been teaching in Naples, and Croce said: “Professor, you should go away and learn *Napoletano* ...”

Question: How far, would you say, was Italian philosophy itself still present or relevant in the debates and discussions of the period?

Vattimo: Actually very little. Gentile had been a fascist, Croce struck us as more of a historical scholar of literature than as a philosopher. In order to promote the cause of aesthetics, in Italy, Pareyson had engaged directly with Croce, which seemed to suggest that there was no real Italian alternative tradition anyway. I also went along to the lectures of Del Noce, who was offering courses on Italian philosophy, and I remember one in particular on Gramsci, who was also discussed in Del Noce’s book on atheism. Nobody was studying Ugo Spirito, at this time, although some Marxists were reading Galvano della Volpe. Eugenio Garin was writing books on the history of philosophy, and he was a kind of Gramscian, but, to tell the truth, this was a philosophy that was too involved in party politics to be fully present in our own debates. It is no accident that my first exercise in academic lecturing concerned an Anglophone philosopher, namely John Dewey. Pareyson had asked me to expound and discuss Dewey’s book as *Experience*. It was all the fashion to listen to what the Americans were saying, and we should remember that of all American philosophers at this time Dewey was the one who was most sympathetic to the thought of Hegel.

Question: Your dissertation on Aristotle might seem rather “oblique” in relation to the sort of issues that you would go on to address subsequently.

Vattimo: In between my political engagement and the demands of teaching I did of course give some time to writing the dissertation you mention. I graduated in November 1959 with this dissertation on Aristotle which I composed primarily with reference to the observations of Aquinas. My decision to study the concept of *poiesis* in Aristotle was determined by the fact that Pareyson’s aesthetics was essentially a theory of production, of making and fashioning,

an approach that introduced a range of completely new questions into the general context of Italian aesthetics which had largely been conditioned by Crocean idealism. Umberto Eco, who had also recently graduated under Pareyson, had written his own dissertation on the aesthetic ideas of Aquinas: if one also bears in mind that I was still a practising Catholic at the time, and that I counted many Thomists amongst my friends, it is not so difficult to understand the reasons for my choice. I proposed a non-romantic reading of *poiesis* in Aristotle in the sense that it was considered as merely one of the many ways in which human beings “produce” things. The central problem concerned the meaning of the idea of “imitation”: to imitate, for Aristotle, essentially signified “to act like nature,” not simply to reproduce nature as a spectator that represents the latter. It was this twofold character in the concept of imitation that really interested me. And, in more general terms, I think that I was particularly attracted by the idea of going back to the roots of a Christian mode of philosophising, perhaps a pre-modern mode of thinking, and one which breaks with the tradition of modern rationalism.

Question: After graduation, you made a decisive choice for your future career: you opted to study the thought of two specifically “anti-modern” philosophers, Nietzsche and Heidegger.

Vattimo: To tell the truth, I originally wanted to study Adorno! From 1955 onwards I had been enthusiastically reading the writings of “Critical Theory,” and *Minima Moralia* had just appeared in Italian translation. But when I told Pareyson that I wished to study Adorno, he was quite astonished and simply said: “But why? At least go and study Nietzsche, who is one of the masters of anti-modernity.” In fact, Adorno was very popular at the time with the left-leaning intellectuals that Pareyson particularly distrusted. In retrospect, I think I can say that what I really needed to study was a philosophy that was contemporary, but not modern, in the sense in which the Enlightenment and historicism can be called typically “modern.” Even if I was, at that time, no longer particularly Thomistic in my outlook, the principal idea was still that of discovering a mode of thought that was compatible with Christianity: the anti-modern thinkers represented at least the possibility of talking of God – in opposition to the Marxist project of “demystifying” all theological discourse, in opposition to Enlightenment secularisation, in opposition to historicism. And in fact I soon began to read Nietzsche: in the summer of 1960 I spent a week in an Alpine retreat, skiing until midday, and working in the afternoon, where I read *The Birth of Tragedy*, along with “The Use and Abuse of History for Life,” the second of Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*, albeit in French translations. At this time I was unable to read German and the lat-

ter work had not yet been translated into Italian. I still remember this time with particular pleasure. Nietzsche's essay on history exercised a profound effect on me, perhaps because I discovered here a critique of modernity as "mass society" that in many respects already resembled the critical perspective developed by Adorno.

Question: So Nietzsche came first, followed by Heidegger?

Vattimo: Not exactly. Heidegger's lectures on Nietzsche were published in Germany in 1961, and I immediately began to read them, along with certain other texts of Heidegger such as the *Letter on Humanism*, in the summer of that year in Heidelberg, where I was now studying German. In hindsight, I would say that it was actually Heidegger who had fascinated me most from the beginning. In November 1961, if I remember correctly, I had already delivered a lecture before the Italian Society of Philosophy, in the presence of several rather eminent and venerable figures. The text was entitled "Who is Heidegger's Nietzsche?," and eventually became the first chapter of my book *Essere, storia e linguaggio*, published in 1963. Before that I had written very little on Nietzsche, merely two or three essays – I recall a couple entitled "Il problema della testimonianza in Nietzsche" and "Nietzsche e il problema del tempo," pieces which were incorporated into *Ipotesi su Nietzsche*, which was published in 1967. The latter volume also contained an essay that I had already delivered at a conference on Nietzsche in Royaumont in 1964. Gabriel Marcel was also present on that occasion and I actually remember seeing him weep. "Well, he must be deeply moved," I thought to myself, but then they all said to me: "Don't worry, Marcel always weeps." He was then very advanced in years, and was easily moved!

Question: When did you obtain your first official university position?

Vattimo: Until 1962 I had taught at a workers' school, and then at a secondary school, to be specific at the Rosmini School, where I got into trouble for taking my class to political demonstrations, something which scandalised the school authorities. At the end of 1962 I was awarded a Humboldt scholarship and spent a couple of years in Heidelberg. The really significant event of those years was the fact that we were working on the second edition of the Sansoni *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, edited under the auspices of the "Centro Studi di Gallarate," a monumental publication in several volumes, which has proved to be something of a burden since, after more than forty years, I still have to rewrite a number of entries in order to keep the work up to date ... At the time I was just an assistant lecturer at the university, which meant that

I was not earning anything to speak of, which is why I had to work at the “Rosmini,” as well as spending two afternoons a week on the *Encyclopaedia*, all of which involved a huge amount of work. I thus had three or four afternoons a week in which to compose my books: Pareyson used to telephone me every day to see how I was coping. I wrote the book on Heidegger between 1961 and 1963, while in 1964 I became a qualified university lecturer in Turin, which was my first official university teaching post. I believe that the first course I offered was on Nietzsche, then on Heidegger, and after that on Bloch and Schleiermacher. On account of the huge amount of work I had taken on, I also contracted a serious ulcer at this time, a problem that would recur in 1969 and resulted in a period of recuperation in hospital, from all of which I emerged as a “Maoist”...

Question: And when did you first come into contact with Gadamer, a thinker who has been very important in your philosophical career, but who was certainly no Nietzschean?

Vattimo: That was in 1962, in Heidelberg, when I began working on a translation of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, although my version only finally came out in 1971. I completed the work while still in Heidelberg in the summer of 1969, where I would go to discuss the translation with Gadamer about once a week, as I had already done in the period between 1962 and 1964. We rarely spoke about Nietzsche, and then only about his objections to historicism as they were expressed in the second of the *Untimely Meditations*. For the rest, the book on Nietzsche which I published in 1974 held little interest for Gadamer, although of course he figured in the text itself at one point. Pareyson wasn’t best pleased with it either because I had argued that contemporary hermeneutics ran the risk of simply intoning the song “everything passes, everything returns, the wheel of being is eternal,” quite forgetting the sting in the serpent’s tail which for me, at the time, was a matter of revolution pure and simple ... Certainly, when I think back upon all this now, these were stirring times!

Question: With regard to the issue of Gadamer and hermeneutics, your book on Schleiermacher came out in 1968, which might simply appear as something of a parenthesis in the context of your general Nietzschean-Heideggerian trajectory. And in the same year you won the open competition for a full professorship at the University of Turin.

Vattimo: I wrote the book on Schleiermacher very quickly with the competition in mind, but taking everything into consideration, I wouldn’t simply dismiss it either: it was an attempt to reconstruct the proper beginnings of

philosophical hermeneutics, to furnish some historical background and support to a project that had become rather dry and theoretical in character. It was an extremely difficult book to write, and one which perhaps interests me even more now than it did then, based entirely as it was on fragmentary passages, or on texts that had never been edited, or at least never adequately edited, before. From the philological point of view it was a solid piece of work, and I had read all of the available literature on the subject, whether in German or Italian. I am not sure to what extent my interpretation of Schleiermacher could be described as Gadamerian: Gadamer himself claimed that interpretation, as Schleiermacher understood it, involved a “reconstruction” of an original meaning in its pure state, whereas Heidegger’s approach was the very opposite of this. But since I had started from the psychological notion of interpretation and the hermeneutic circle, I tended to assimilate Schleiermacher to Dilthey, and thus to Heidegger as well. In any case, I won the aforementioned competition in 1968–69 and was duly appointed in Turin, where I began by offering courses on Ernst Bloch since, as I said, I had become a Maoist and regarded myself as a true revolutionary.

Question: To what extent did the developments in Pareyson’s thought also exercise an influence on your own philosophy?

Vattimo: To be quite honest, I had understood really very little of his earlier writings. His first works on existentialism, or the book on Fichte, were composed in an extremely arcane idiom and developed in a highly “internal” way, like someone who was pursuing the history of philosophy not in order to explain to others, but rather to work on it by himself. The most lucid passages were those concerned with elucidating our knowledge of “the Other,” with ethical questions which were connected, from the beginning, with the notion of interpretation. I was very taken, for example, with the central idea of his book *Esistenza e persona* where he argued that interpretation is a kind of knowledge which persons possess with regard to forms – I feel that not even Gadamer has ever expressed this idea with the same clarity that is achieved here. In the early years of our association Pareyson was almost exclusively preoccupied with problems of aesthetics, but it is certainly true that we worked very closely together up until 1968. In the autumn of 1964, when I was specifically charged with teaching aesthetics, he delivered an introductory theoretical lecture entitled “Expressive Thought and Revelatory Thought.” We worked so closely together that I had the impression that he was reproducing certain theses which I had discussed in my book on Heidegger, related to the idea that thinking is itself a thinking of being in both the objective and subjective sense. Expressed in Heideggerean terms, what he called “rev-

elatory thought” was a thinking which inaugurated a new opening, while “expressive thought” was a thinking that restricted itself to articulating “from within” an opening which had already been constituted. In fact our intellectual relationship was really a very intense one, we would sit down together every afternoon and he would read everything that I had written: my study of Heidegger developed in parallel with the development of certain fundamental theses of his own thought. Subsequently, my interpretations of Heidegger and Nietzsche developed in a more independent fashion. Even now, when I attempt to explain Pareyson’s thought, what strikes me most forcibly about him is something that we discussed throughout these years, from the 1970s up until his death: I always attempted to get him to admit – although he never would – that his idea of God, of the evil in God, could only be interpreted in terms of the “event.” According to me, he ought to have intensified his thesis in a more profoundly historical sense instead of insisting as he did on the source or inexhaustible origin. I have never really understood why we were unable to come to agreement on this question, but perhaps in truth his outlook was much more religious than my own.

Question: But then one of his favourite authors was always Schelling, who has never appealed to you in this way.

Vattimo: Yes, you are right. It always seemed to me that no one should be really shocked at the idea that there is something evil in God! The truth is that Pareyson felt the force of the problem of evil much more than I did – in this I am perhaps more like Gadamer, that is to say, more Hegelian than Schellingian in perspective. The books that Pareyson loved the most bear witness to his obsession with the question of evil: the writings of Schelling, Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard. A large number of his students also followed him in this regard. I myself, to be honest, up until a certain point in my life existentially shared this dramatic vision, based as it was on the idea of sin, and the fundamental opposition between good and evil. But subsequently, after the operation for the ulcer, I adopted a revolutionary outlook, and thus began to develop the concept of “weak thought.”

Question: As far as the development of your reading of Nietzsche, and more generally the development of your own thought, is concerned, what was the significance of the major new French interpretations of Nietzsche?

Vattimo: Well, I was certainly familiar with Deleuze’s interpretation of Nietzsche, although I didn’t make much use of it myself. I believe that, sometime after 1968, I wrote a “Preface” to his book on Nietzsche which came out

in Italy with a Florence publishing house, Colportage, which no longer exists. I have never really fully understood the importance that has been accorded to the Deleuzian reading of Nietzsche: even now, Deleuze strikes me as a modern Bergson translated into left wing terms. His *Anti-Oedipus* contained little more than a kind of activist vitalism – it is necessary to liberate life, and actively endorse the process of temporality – although of course it appealed to me on account of its anti-capitalist thrust.

I was not especially fascinated by Foucault either. His version of structuralism applied to history still seemed to me to be metaphysical in character. And then again, the *History of Madness in the Classical Age* is a work intrinsically bound up with a very specific French cultural atmosphere: by the “classical age” we Italians understand something quite different from the age of Louis XIV and so forth ... At a certain point, to tell the truth, I also considered writing a history of madness, understood as a counter-history to the standard story of western rationality. I discussed the idea with Marziano Guglielminetti, who told me a good deal about the “mad” figures encountered in the history of literature, about Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* and so on. The idea behind all this was similar to Foucault’s, and essentially concerned the problem of social norms in general and the role of discipline. But the publication of Foucault’s book was basically something of a liberation for me since I have always recognised a certain lack of historical culture as one of my own limitations. I only read things that, right from the first page, already convince to explore the material in greater depth, and thus the works that I can claim to “read” are relatively rare. And if we add to this, the fact that as theorists we tend to have renounced the necessity of learning history in detail, that I had been a “working” student for such a long time, well ... All these factors largely explain, firstly, why I never did write that history of madness, and, secondly, why I embraced the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics. On one occasion I even had altercation with Colli – the only time we met in person, in Palermo, at one of the early meetings of the *Nietzsche Society* founded by Alfredo Fallica. Colli shouted at me, from the podium, declaring “there we are, nobody reads Plato himself any more ...” It is true that I have always been more interested in the secondary literature than in the primary authors themselves, but this is a kind of limitation which I believe I can defend theoretically insofar as the only real access we can have to authors of the past is by means of their “effective history,” that is, by means of the successive interpretations of those who came after them.

In any case, I never found Foucault’s interpretation of Nietzsche convincing: on his version, Nietzsche is ultimately still a proto-Nazi thinker insofar as he remains an apologist for the connection between truth and force, even though Foucault himself would interpret his philosophy as a way of unveiling

the hidden dimension of power. I did take over the expression “ontology of the present” from Foucault, but in fact, on closer examination, there is no ontology in Foucault’s thought: he simply limits himself to reconstructing the “episteme” of the different cultural-historical horizons in which we have been cast.

Question: And Derrida?

Vattimo: I only began to read Derrida later, when his earlier writings began to appear in Italian translation. It would have been around 1972, when I spent a couple of semesters in the United States, at Albany, while I was working on *Il soggetto e la maschera*, which came out in 1974. At that time I was attempting to develop my Nietzschean-Heideggerean perspective as a philosophy of revolution by drawing on Herbert Marcuse and on Ernst Bloch’s conception of utopia.

Question: In short, your interpretation of Nietzsche was influenced far more by German philosophy than by French philosophy?

Vattimo: Actually, I didn’t catch up with ’68 until the following year. Initially, Nietzsche interested me mainly on account of his anti-historicist approach, but I was soon converted to what could be called a kind of “Catholico-Marxism,” and I started to read him in parallel with Marcuse. At that time, in short, I had very little to do with the modern French thinkers; I was busy exploring the German tradition, of Lukács, Bloch, and Marcuse especially. When I was writing *Il soggetto e la maschera* my ambition was to become the ideologist for the radical libertarian Left: I imagined that my book might represent the philosophy of “Il Manifesto,” but no one else felt the same! No one ever read it, for they were all still strict dialecticians, and when Lukács died “Il Manifesto” carried a glowing tribute, quite oblivious of the fact that I had already expressed my own disgust at such stupidity! And they were lauding the later Lukács, of all things, the author of *The Destruction of Reason!*

Anyway, my book came out with Bompiani since, on completing the text, I showed it to Umberto Eco, whom I had not seen for a number of years, and informed him that I had emerged from 1968 as a Maoist. He replied, “Fine, but you have also come out of it as an academic.” He was rather acerbic about the entire thing since he had not been successful in the competition I mentioned earlier. On the other hand, it was not my fault if Pareyson kept complaining that Eco was living over in Milan, that he was on very friendly terms with Paci, that he never sent him any Christmas greetings (I used to defend Eco on this point, for I never know what to write on these occasions either, and Eco is quite incapable of producing any formula of the usual “sincere greet-

ings” kind), that he accorded too much importance to semiotics (though this is something I have never understood either). Anyway, Eco got them to read my book at Bompiani and it got published as a result. I had thereby become a little member of the circle of Nietzschean nihilists, and was now down to deliver lectures on Nietzsche, Marx, and nihilism. This was the period when the “Red” city councils were so successful, and in 1975 Rovatti, Bodei, Cacciari and I went all round the new left wing councils. I remember one evening in Bologna where I had been invited, along with Rovatti and Cacciari, and people were even standing on the stairs because the hall was filled to capacity. We were there to speak on the subject of Marxism and nihilism. Cacciari had already written his book *Krisis*, where Nietzsche is presented as a defender of technological anti-humanism, which is rather like the role of capitalism in Marx – you don’t know whether to welcome it because it incubates the revolution, or curse it because it delays its arrival. Anyway, philosophy was an enormously popular subject back then. We all thought that the political transformation of Italy should be accompanied by a democratisation of philosophical questions, without sacrificing the level of cultural discourse on such matters.

Question: At a certain point, then, your philosophy had become a militant one. But what concrete form, philosophically speaking, did your endorsement of the radical movement assume?

Vattimo: Before I discovered Marcuse and the student movement, my philosophy had been one of “romantic anti-capitalism” in Lukács’s sense of the expression. But in my *Introduction to Heidegger*, which was written between 1969 and 1970, I had already begun to think of Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics in terms of the concept of “reification.” For by this time I had begun to study Heidegger in earnest, and for me his philosophy essentially coincided with his critique of metaphysics, which was itself intimately bound up with the totally rationalised society of modernity.

I was even robbed of my little book on Heidegger. Someone stole it in Rome where I had taken the manuscript with the intention of offering it to the publisher Laterza. I had gone out to eat with a friend and left the manuscript in a suitcase in the car which was parked in a 16th century courtyard. When I returned, the suitcase had vanished. I had to reconstruct the text on the basis of a very faded copy and worked like a madman to do so. The whole book was basically concerned with the relationship between “technicity” and the rationalised mass society of the modern world.

Question: And so you developed the idea of combining Heidegger, Nietzsche, and Marx ...

Vattimo: To think of Nietzsche in terms of a critique of bourgeois, in the manner of Marx or Heidegger, certainly seems outrageous, from a historical point of view, but can effectively be justified in retrospect: there has been such a thing as Nietzschean communism after all, and the popularity of Nietzsche in France was far more characteristic of the political left than the right, and the same is true of Heidegger. To put it very simply, I had begun to think that Heidegger's "history of being," which was somehow supposed to encourage the return of an experience of being that was no longer simply inauthentic, can be meaningfully compared with the Marxian theory of "alienation" which was also supposed to be overcome in a society that would be authentically human, where the prevailing division of labour would be effectively reduced, where private property would no longer exist, where the state would wither away. I was hardly the only one to think along these lines: Marcuse, after all, had once been a student of Heidegger's in Germany, and Kostas Axelos had written a book entitled *Marx – Thinker of Technicity*, a work that was widely read in Italy at the end of the 1960s and had defended claims not dissimilar to my own. To bring Heidegger, Nietzsche and Marx together represented an attempt to unite, also from a historical perspective, the most advanced form of the bourgeois spirit with the idea of a proletarian revolution; and without the spirit of the avant-garde the proletarian revolution would never be able to succeed, as it indeed failed to succeed in Russia. And this idea of forging a kind of "Marxian-Nietzschean-Heideggereanism" was an exhilarating experience for me, one which lasted until 1976-78.

Question: Before we come onto the concept of "weak thinking," can you describe the results of your style of political discourse at this time?

Vattimo: At that time, politically speaking, there had been a sort of general "flirtation" with the far Left, but fortunately that never led me to endorse a Marxist-Leninist position, although this is precisely what did happen with many of my students. In those years I was also sympathetic to some of the ideas of Antonio Negri when he elaborated on the conception of "riding horseback," which meant leaning neither to the left, nor to the right, but simply pressing ahead: instead of trying to form a Leninist advance guard of the revolution, we wished to create autonomous and anarchistic communities which would escape and transcend the prevailing logic of power. Hence our ambition to live without relation to institutions of power at all: as if subjectivity itself was inevitably bound up with subjection, as if we only became subjects by subjecting ourselves to the structures of power. This is the central idea of my little volume *Al di là del soggetto*, which Feltrinelli published on the recommendation of Rovatti. The true revolution would be an inner revolu-

tion which would involve a dismantling of subjectivity. At a certain point, when I went to the United States, I tried to explain to people there how the Italian Left had finally entered a post-Gramscian phase. For Gramsci had still idealised the figure of the worker who labours and makes himself worthy to succeed the bourgeois order, like the Hegelian slave who acquires skills and capacities through his labour and thus finds himself in a position to take command of society itself. But in reality the workers who came to Turin and got involved in student/worker protests were completely uprooted immigrants from the South – in this sense they were arch-post-modernist in outlook, and far from idealising labour, they resented it, and really just wanted to enjoy themselves.

Question: When you think back on the early development of your thought, do you see yourself as someone who began by interpreting other philosophers, and ended up by trying to develop an independent perspective of your own, or do you think that you were really a militant philosopher from the first?

Vattimo: The book that actually saved me from becoming a Marxist-Leninist was *Poesia e ontologia*: when they were trying to get me to join the movement they also made it quite clear that I would have to repudiate the book, and this I refused to do. And quite apart from this, up to a certain point, I had always thought of myself as someone engaged in theoretical work, albeit only within the rather limited domain of aesthetics. Moreover, in Italy it is extremely difficult to engage with serious theoretical work when you are still young, for no one would be prepared to publish your work anyway. If I had announced, when I was younger, that I wished to produce a thesis on “weak thinking,” they would have replied: “that’s fine, but which author in particular are you thinking of?” In fact, this is an essentially institutional problem, connected with grants and subsidies, with financial support generally, with the way academic works are currently judged and assessed. Exceptions to this unwritten rule are very rare, for within the general panorama of publishing houses there are only one or two with a philosophically adventurous policy, such as that pursued by Adelphi. But at the same time, I have always “approached” the authors I chose to study from the perspective of highly theoretical questions. The contrast between my own approach and that pursued by most historians of philosophy springs from this: I study Max Weber because it is important and rewarding to study him, not because we still need another book about him. The history of philosophy is extremely useful because we would otherwise possess no parameters for judging any particular work at all. At the same time I reject the model of scholarship which is adopted by many historians of philosophy and is based on the myth of a value-free perspective.

Question: From the academic and ideological point of view, this critical view of the historians of philosophy left a very strong mark on a certain period of your own work.

Vattimo: The idea of “weak thought” became quite well known because everyone wanted to challenge it. In fact many of the historians of philosophy active at Turin (and I am thinking of Viano and Rossi in particular) revealed a certain resentment in this regard that derived from the failure of their own theoretical approach. The truth is that when they tried to reconcile philosophy and political engagement – at the beginning of the 1960s in terms of a neo-Enlightenment approach, a common project in which Abbagnano, Bobbio and others also participated – their attempt failed entirely because the radical students found it utterly remote and effectively despised it. Almost all of their best students became marxists – I am thinking of people like Rieser, Mottura, Gliozzi – and started contributing to the “Quaderni Rossi” of Panzieri: their political-philosophical movement, in short, ended up in a kind of an extreme form of Italian marxism known as “operaismo” and they increasingly found themselves ignored. And then there was a whole methodological problem involved here too: the idea of “weak thought” was fundamentally anti-scientific in character, whereas Viano was still fascinated by Abbagnano’s “positive existentialism” and was largely sympathetic to the American and modernist tradition of thought. The neo-Enlightenment approach promoted the idea of modernising the university, endorsed an American model of the university, where a new institution, the “Department,” would replace the ancient “Institute.” The latter was regarded as kind of feudal bastion, while the Department would be organised in a far more democratic fashion and would be understood as a meeting point of various disciplines. Pareyson and I, on the other hand, saw ourselves as much more radical, and the last thing we had in mind was the mere Americanisation of the university, since we were, after all, hearkening to Being itself.

Question: But didn’t science suggest a rather different mode of thinking?

Vattimo: As far as science is concerned, I have always taken a Heideggerian position which tends to identify science with technology, and does so from a broadly operationalist view of science itself. Science is not thinking, it does not truly know things – it simply functions. But why should we conclude from the fact that it functions that it can claim to tell us how things are?

Question: When did you begin to enjoy a certain public notoriety and to start writing in the newspapers?

Vattimo: The first time that Ezio Mauro interviewed me concerned my decision to stand for the “Radicals,” in 1975–76, after the referendum on divorce. I first began to attain some public notoriety when I started writing for “Tuttolibri,” which was more or less around the same time.

Question: The real turning point in the development of your thought seems to have coincided with the birth and emergence of Italian terrorism. It is surely no accident that the repudiation of revolutionary violence was decisive for the genesis of “weak thought.”

Vattimo: These were very difficult times. The “Red Brigades” began to mobilise in 1975, and in 1977 I became president of the “Faculty of Letters and Philosophy” at the University of Turin. When I was threatened by the Red Brigades I received advice from two quarters: the police, who said they could put me under surveillance by people I would never even notice, and the doorkeeper, who would tell me there were four characters sitting in a car outside the building who she thought might well be terrorists. And someone else told me that the Red Brigades had drawn up a list of targets, including left-leaning intellectuals who were opposed to terrorist methods. As a result, I would often take a taxi when I left the house in the morning. At that time there was really very little to smile about: at one point I actually had to flee to Tuscany, and just as we were about to return to Turin – it was 16 March 1978 – we turned on the radio and heard about the kidnapping of Moro and headed straight back to the cellar... We stayed put in the house of a wealthy friend and managed to get through a lot of excellent provisions as I remember. In any case, I continued to act as President of the Faculty up until the early 1980s, and thus to remain effectively “entangled” in the prevailing institutions. But in the meantime the idea of “weak thought” had started to emerge.

The aspect of all this which I would strongly wish to underline here is precisely the ethico-political dimension of demythologising the traditional revolutionary ideal and repudiating the use of violence. It was an attempt to remain faithful to the revolutionary attitude towards capitalist society without falling into Leninism. Those who effectively taught me that Leninism could never have succeeded in the first place were my own students who were getting themselves arrested. Reading their letters from prison, it reminded me of the voice of those who had once been condemned to death for their activities during the resistance, but I also recognised a sense in which they were deceiving themselves. These were young people who would rise at the crack of dawn in order to convince themselves they were workers, jump on their bikes with their CB radios, and go off to prepare their “operations.” This is quite different from the liberated subject imagined by Nietzsche: the Nietzschean

“Overman” could never be a revolutionary of the Leninist type. At that time I flirted with the “Radicals,” and when the Red Brigades started threatening me in 1978, I had already, in 1976, been an official candidate for the Radical Party. It was quite logical, therefore, that a certain kind of “weakness” would strike me, in those years, as the only remaining form of possible emancipation.

Question: Where did the expression “weak thought” originally come from?

Vattimo: Well, a short time before, Gargani had edited a collection of essays which was published by Einaudi under the title *Crisi della ragione*. Viano had contributed an article in which he spoke of “weak reason.” I myself first used the expression “weak thought” in an essay written in 1979, which was entitled *Dialettica e pensiero debole* and eventually appeared in my book of 1983. In fact this title had been invented by Rovatti who was working for Feltrinelli at the time. Then both of us convinced, indeed almost compelled, Eco to write an essay on Isidore of Seville and “rhizomatic” knowledge. In fact, Eco was cheerfully indifferent to the expression “weak thought,” but the themes pursued in some of his novels, such as *Foucault’s Pendulum* and *The Name of the Rose*, are basically typical of weak thinking as I understand it. In one case everything turns on a question which turns out, in the end, to be of entirely marginal significance, and a matter for humour, while in the other, a kind of Grail quest eventually evaporates into almost nothing, and we are left with nothing but a piece of paper, a kind of bill, that has merely been misunderstood. This is an authentic expression of the spirit of weak thinking, in the sense of Nietzsche’s aphorism that tells us that the more we know of the origin of something, the more insignificant the origin itself becomes.

Question: It is some years now since you came upon the idea of liberation as a liberation from the world of completed technology. But it was only subsequently that you started to argue that this liberation can only be a “weak” liberation, that is to say, one that is no longer metaphysical in character.

Vattimo: From the philosophical point of view, the encounter with French thought had by this time now become quite central for me. I am thinking of Derrida, but also of Deleuze and Klossowski, all of whom were intent on emphasising notions of anarchy, difference, and deconstruction. According to this common vision, the best that Nietzscheans can do is to conspire against the state, rather than attempting to found a new one. Revolution is always something marginal, and can never assume direct political power if it wished to remain uncorrupted. “Weak thought” was conceived as a kind of response to the one-sided character of two positions here: on the one hand,

the dialectical approach which promised a political transformation which was still imbued with authoritarian elements, and on the other, the philosophy of difference that ultimately yearned for an origin which one could never reach in principle.

From the philosophical point of view, the idea that the liberated subject was essentially a weak subject is a notion directly connected with my interpretation of Heidegger. At one point I wrote a “Preface” to Schopenhauer’s *The World as Will and Representation*, and began to realise that I preferred a radically non-metaphysical form of Heideggerean thought, one I would also describe as non-Pareysonian. For Pareyson had continued to speak of the well-spring of truth, something which appeared to me to be a residual metaphysics, a sort of nostalgia for an ultimate ground or origin, although Pareyson always rejected this criticism. In my eyes, it seemed as if he wanted to rediscover some foundation, which was no longer of course an Aristotelian kind of God, but one who had triumphed over nothingness by creating the world. Now Schopenhauer intrigued me precisely insofar as he was critical of the will to survival: “weak thought” encourages us to think of being as disintegration, dissolution, decomposition, the exact contrary, in fact, of the will to life. And morality is nothing other than *askesis*, the negation of the will to power.

In these years I was deeply preoccupied by one problem in particular: what precisely did Heidegger expect – the return of being? The right wing interpretation of Heidegger always insisted precisely on this recuperation of the origin. But if I preferred, on the contrary, to defend a weak reading of Heidegger there was a specific theoretical justification for this, namely that it was more respectful of the idea of ontological difference, of the irreducibility of being to beings. As if there was no being somewhere over and beyond beings, but only one which progressively dissolved within beings themselves. And if I thought of *askesis* as a form of weakening in contrast to the claims of positive reality, did this mean that I had become a Schopenhauerean? No, it meant that I am a Christian! There had been a time when I no longer attended Mass, although I had never indulged in polemical attacks on my own religious heritage or the Church as such. In those years it was all a question of the demands of the present: the role of Christian Democracy, the current Left, the radical movements etc. But now I had begun to rediscover the original meaning of my religious commitments. Of course, something similar is also true of Heidegger: his critique of metaphysics was born from his meditations on the experience of temporality in the early Christian communities.

Question: One of the fundamental themes of your thought is precisely the notion of an intrinsic connection between violence and metaphysics.

Vattimo: I spent a great deal of time discussing the significance of revolutionary violence with my students, as well as on the fact that such violence was nothing but the remnant of a position that was still metaphysical in character. In order to explain the reasons for this latter thesis I can only appeal to what I have already said: for what reason and in what sense does “weak thought” regard itself as a Heideggereanism more Heideggerean than that of Heidegger himself? Because the doctrine of weakness, as we pointed out, is the only coherent way of fully respecting the idea of ontological difference. It is precisely here that the intrinsic connection with violence is revealed. The conflation of being with beings stifles the possibility of thinking existence as open historicity because it results in the identification of an ultimate but silent ground. If you discover such a foundation, you can easily recognise it from the fact that you no longer need to seek anything further. The connection between violence and metaphysics springs from the fact that something is presented in a simply peremptory fashion, something before which you can only say, “yes, indeed, this is simply how it is,” something before which you can only bow your head and obey. This is the crucial problem, in the sense that in the western philosophical tradition even God has principally been conceived as an ultimum to which we cannot refuse our assent. It is not properly recognised that this way of conceiving God is also determined by an essentially metaphysical outlook, as if God were an ultimate entity or object that presents itself as utterly evident, as entirely given and transparent before us. “Such is the will of God” is an expression that is used only when we have to accept a damaging blow, rather than when we actually win the lottery, for example. As if the ultimate foundation of things were something that resists me, even negatively, something in which I must simply acquiesce. But if this foundation is the kind of immutable permanence propounded by metaphysics, what are we to do with freedom, sin, and existence? In short, what I find repellent about the idea of an ultimate metaphysical ground is precisely the peremptory character, the unchallengeable nature of such a foundation, something which involves a series of effects that make it impossible for us to think the character of human existence. I am convinced that there is no other way of defining violence philosophically than this: the idea of a foundation before which one can only fall silent. If you interrogate the tradition, the attempt to define violence will lead you back to the conception of “natural place” in Aristotle. “Violence” is everything which prevents a being from realising its essence, something which is given for all time: fire has a natural tendency to rise, stone a natural tendency to fall. If you read the Aristotelian texts, you will see that the technical process which places one brick upon another in order to build a house is also a violent and overbearing intervention, something that is *para physin* or “contrary to nature,” even if this violent

intervention is quite justified. The problem is that you cannot define violence except as a “contrast with the inner nature” of a being. But is the inner nature of a being always to be accepted simply as it is? As I see it, one cannot find, even amongst philosophers who explicitly speak of violence, a truly coherent philosophical definition of this concept. The only definition of violence that seems appropriate is that which refers to a process of silencing, of an affirmation of authority, which claims: I am in command here. I cannot deny the fact that this is an extremely hermeneutical definition which identifies violence with an insistent objectivity before which one can only bow one’s head, but all other definitions of violence strike me as far less convincing. Existentially speaking, even the fact of being thrown into the world is a form of originary violence that must be acknowledged as such: it is clear that one can easily connect this fact to the natural experience of birth in which I am given to myself, but if I continue to remain simply as I am given, without taking responsibility for myself, without articulating or interpreting myself, then I am not acting as I should. Thus the sense of thrownness, of a continual rethinking of the history of being, is perhaps also bound up with this fundamental experience: as soon as I am born I always begin to exist in inauthenticity, I am a finite being and, as such, have a beginning that I can never completely cancel or absorb in processes of self-reflection. My history is nothing but the continual effort to absorb this starting point of my existence, to come to terms with my finitude, and thus to take over what has been given to me, to appropriate all this by interpreting and transmitting it in a newly modified way. As if authenticity consisted in the decision to live my finitude as a way of appropriating and transforming this very finitude. We find ourselves in situations whose peremptory character must be absorbed and consumed in a process of interpretation. In a certain way this is also the model for how Heidegger thinks of the history of being: there is a finite happening which is then articulated, dissolved, and disseminated in processes of everyday significance, and is not “sacralised” in a kind of merely contemplative stasis.

Question: We have discussed at some length the general cultural and political context in which “weak thought” came to birth. But what are the specifically theoretical points of reference for the development of this perspective? What are the particular philosophical traditions to which you are indebted in this regard?

Vattimo: The concept of “weak thought” is a product, in the first place, of a certain confluence between the existentialist and hermeneutic traditions. Philosophical hermeneutics proper was born in the 20th century when we fully recognised, with Heidegger and Gadamer, the idea that truth is essen-

tially an experience of interpretation, and that human existence possesses an intrinsically hermeneutical character. We are always thrown into a projected situation which provides a certain pre-understanding of the world and in relation to which every subsequent articulation is also an interpretation: we can no longer believe that we can directly access objects as if we were the kind of a *tabula rasa* suggested by the empiricist tradition. It is no accident that Heidegger is at once a major theoretician of existential and of hermeneutic thought alike. For to conceive of human existence outside of the traditional metaphysical framework of “objectivity” is equivalent to discovering its intrinsically “interpretative” character. And in the second place, “weak thought” also derives from the transformation of neo-positivist philosophy into analytical and linguistic philosophy. Building on the insights of the so-called “later” Wittgenstein, philosophy became a form of analysis and came to recognise the plurality of our language games. From this perspective, avoiding philosophical error meant respecting the rules that are peculiar to each such language game. “Weak thought,” in this sense, springs from the recognition that, in our actual experience of the world, we are never directly concerned with facts but with texts and words. We must thus acknowledge, with Heidegger, that “language is the house of being.” Moreover, this recognition of the centrality of language is not peculiar only to analytical philosophy or existential hermeneutics, but is also shared by the 20th century structuralist tradition. Structuralism was born from the idea that linguistics could provide the model for all forms of rational knowledge, and could do so precisely by virtue of its formalist character. One of the fundamental discoveries of structural linguistics, derived from the work of de Saussure, was the notion that words signify not by virtue of some direct relationship to objects, but because linguistic meanings are constituted through internal formal differentiation, as if a play of differences between signifiers were at work. This implies that the signified is an effect of the signifier, of the differential play of signifiers: “dog” is distinguished from “fog,” but we only have to change the “d” to “f” to produce the entirely different meaning. It is this system which gives the word “dog” its meaning, and not some strange relationship to a four-footed animal out there. In the 1960s there were at least two other major sciences, apart from linguistics, which recognised the importance of this principle, namely anthropology and psychoanalysis. We only need to think of Lévy-Strauss and Lacan in this connection. All these traditions are relevant, in varying degrees, to the idea of “weak thought,” understood as a recognition of the crisis of global reason, that is, a recognition of the fact that there are only “local reasons” that are themselves relative to particular linguistic parameters and spheres of experience that are quite specific and peculiar to certain domains.

Question: We have not said very much about contemporary Italian philosophy: could you tell us something about your relationship to the most prominent figures of Italian philosophical culture over the last thirty years or so, from Severino and Cacciari to Bodei and Givone, or whoever else you would like to mention in this context – including those who are active outside of the official academic culture (such as Sergio Quinzio)?

Vattimo: For a variety of reasons, I don't think I can say that I have been particularly deeply influenced by my Italian colleagues: I have always enjoyed very cordial relations with philosophers such as Sini, Cacciari, and Severino, but I would hardly speak of any real "theoretical" fellowship in this connection. At the beginning of the 1980s, in the month of June, I remember, there was an official gathering of philosophical theorists at the Franciscan monastery at Monteripido, on the outskirts of Perugia. A number of American scholars, mostly phenomenologists, were also invited. Philosophers such as Vitiello, Sini, Cacciari, Perniola, Carchia were amongst the Italian participants. It was also on this occasion that I got to meet Reiner Schürmann. However, a certain rivalry between philosophical schools gradually began to develop: there has always been an element of competition as far as my Italian colleagues are concerned, and when you are running along the same course there is bound to be some pushing and shoving. I have always had a certain rivalry with Cacciari, for example. Personally I think very highly of him, but I have criticised his rather "auratic" manner, that oracular tone which he also shares with Severino.

Question: And what about philosophical colleagues from abroad?

Vattimo: If I were to single out specifically philosophical influences, I would actually refer to thinkers from abroad rather than to other Italian philosophers. The first such thinker with whom I felt considerable theoretical sympathy is Richard Rorty. We first got to know each other in 1979 at a conference in Milwaukee. He had requested a copy of my contribution, in which I had in fact defended very similar claims to those which he advanced in his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. It was on this occasion that he gave me a copy of this book which I read with great interest and attention. I encouraged the project to translate the work into Italian, and collaborated with Diego Marconi in writing the *Preface* to the Italian edition. It was this book which effectively gave birth to the idea of bringing the neo-pragmatic and hermeneutic traditions together in an explicit way. These are in fact the years in which I began to feel particular sympathy for the post-analytic tradition of Anglo-American thought, and to believe in the possibility of a genuine encounter between different traditions

which had all recognised an emphatic “weakening” of what had formerly been regarded as strong structures, and had all undertaken a fundamental reconsideration of the role of language. In this connection it might be better to speak of a profound convergence of ideas rather than of any specific influence. My principal objection to Rorty is that he should have been prepared to embrace more of Heidegger: there is still a certain lack of historical depth in neo-pragmatism and still too much commitment to “immediacy.” This approach should be more prepared to argue in a truly historical manner, rather than attempting to demonstrate its claims “logically,” that is pragmatically.

But even before my encounter with Rorty, I should mention Karl-Otto Apel, whom I was initially encouraged to read by Gianni Carchia, who had produced the Italian translation of *Community and Communication*, the first part of Apel’s substantial two volume work *The Transformation of Philosophy*. I had already looked at Apel’s earlier book *The Idea of Language in the Humanistic Tradition from Dante to Vico*, but it had not made a significant impression on me at the time. I was particularly struck by *Community and Communication*, on the other hand, because it seemed to me to suggest the possibility of redeeming Heidegger’s thought from a renewed and corrected neo-Kantian perspective: Apel had spoken specifically of Wittgenstein’s “semantic revision of Kantianism,” but we could also make an analogous point with regard to Heidegger. I remained in touch with Apel for some years afterwards. And speaking of Apel will naturally bring Habermas to mind as well. In fact, my familiarity with the work of Habermas is much more recent. Although he entertained a certain philosophical respect for Gadamer, who had invited him to Heidelberg, in my eyes Habermas was a neo-Kantian pure and simple. One of the very first things that Gadamer told me to do when I arrived in Heidelberg – apart, that is, from reading the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, a terribly conservative newspaper – was to go and study *Knowledge and Human Interests*, which of course I did. My appreciation of Habermas’s thought has grown significantly over the last few years, possibly helped by the fact that we have had many opportunities to meet one another: first in Paris, at a seminar on Derrida, then in Heidelberg on the occasion of Gadamer’s hundredth birthday, and finally in Istanbul at the World Congress of Philosophy in 2003. It is quite true that his most recent essays on the future of human nature have not impressed me very much. What we share is a certain preoccupation with the question of language, something which derives from Apel, and earlier still from Heidegger; what divides us, on the other hand, is his tenacious commitment to modernity and his norm-governed prescriptivism. I have sometimes drawn on his claims to argue that twentieth century thought has effectively witnessed a transition from the priority once accorded to “truth” to that now accorded to the principle of “charity”: perhaps for him too, truth is not a mat-

ter of “mirroring” anything, but a claim that merits agreement, something we are able to present to others, in short, an essentially intersubjective questioning.

Derrida has long been one privileged point of reference for me, but before his work I would probably mention that of Lyotard. His conception of post-modernism closely corresponded with my own interpretation of Heidegger, which focussed strongly on his essay “The Age of the World Picture,” included in the *Holzwege* collection. Here Heidegger described the process in which the variety of different world pictures had eventually undermined the possibility of producing a single unified representation of the real, an approach which is very similar to that adopted by Lyotard in relation to traditional meta-narratives. It was through reading Lyotard that I have come to reaffirm a Christian perspective: for postmodernity, as envisaged by Lyotard, like the dissolution of metaphysics in Heidegger, has reopened the space for religious discourse: if the grand narratives are finished, the possibility of speaking of God is also reborn, in the sense that religious discourse can no longer be contradicted by the results of science, or interpreted simply as a primitive phase in the evolution of humanity. In this connection, my discovery of René Girard was decisive. When the Italian translation of *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World* came out in 1985 I reviewed the work at the request of Marco Vallora, and began to explore Girard’s theory of the scapegoat as the origin of civilisation, a mechanism of victimisation which Christianity itself repudiates rather than confirms. Even if it is quite true that the ecclesiastical tradition still maintains the idea of Christ as the full and perfect sacrifice, he was actually crucified on account of the truly “scandalous” character of what he taught. This opens the way to a conception of the postmodern as a kind of radicalisation of secularisation, as the end of metaphysics, the end of this entire victim structure. The Church too must now be judged in terms of the loss of the sacred. My objection to Girard has always been that one cannot simply arrest the process of secularisation at a certain point, whereas he appears to think that once the victim character of the original structure of civilisation has been recognised, one cannot relinquish the sacrificial ritual of the Mass. As if, without recourse to the symbolism of sacrifice, we can only perpetuate the cycle of violence, rather than eliminating it.

Question: But doesn’t your interpretation of secularisation sound rather too linear and innocuous? In reality, the movement of secularisation would seem to be more abrupt and discontinuous in character, to involve phases of progress and regression, of enlightenment and resurgent particularism.

Vattimo: This might perhaps be a valid objection to works such as *La società trasparente*, but in the second edition of the text I provided a partial reformula-

tion of the thesis defended in the first edition. I believe, or at least hope, that history is providentially governed in some sense. My reading of Nietzsche, but also of Heidegger, has led in this direction: Nietzsche maintained that the “Overman” would have to rise and respond to the level of those technological powers which humanity had developed, while finally abandoning the once reassuring hierarchical structures of the past. And Heidegger maintains that it is the modern *Gestell*, or technical “enframing” of the world, that permits an initial glimpse of the *Ereignis*, of the “event”: if there is any hope or salvation for us, this certainly cannot be attained by repeating or reclaiming a previous state of development, but only by penetrating to the root of the state in which currently find ourselves. All things considered, my relatively optimistic conception of the process of secularisation springs precisely from this thought. And if Girard does not really agree with me in this regard, this is because he has a pessimistic conception of human nature. But once Jesus has demythologised the natural notion of the sacred, why continue to maintain the symbol of sacrifice if it is not because the human being is irremediably corrupted? I think the fact that he sees himself as an anthropologist, rather than as a philosopher, implies that Christianity does indeed allow us to grasp the truth about the nature of man. For him, in short, truth comes before charity: the unveiling of the mechanism of victimisation, the objective unveiling of the human condition, appears more important than the proclamation of charity which would spring from it.

But to return to your specific *Question*: the idea of “secularisation” is not so much a description of some linear and objective development of history as a proposed interpretation of the historical process that is to be preferred over others. I believe that I can detect certain moments of the European past to which I am sympathetic precisely because they were secularising in character and effect, but certainly not because they inevitably reflect a supposedly necessary historical process. Secularisation, in short, is not the same as what was once defined as “progress.” The entire opening section of my text was a critique of such a linear historicist conception: history as a story of a progressive “weakening” must be taken as an interpretation, not as a supposedly objective description.

Question: This is true, but the fact remains that you have always thought of secularisation as a liberation of differences, while history often seems to suggest that differences are radicalised in terms of their own identity: I am a Croat, you are a Serb, or a Muslim ...

Vattimo: If there is one principle which European culture can furnish today in the context of other cultures, it is that of a “culture of cultural anthropology”

itself, that is, a culture which expressly recognises the multiplicity of cultures. Rorty himself has expressed an awareness of this when he spoke of the superiority of democracy over philosophy. What I have described as a “weakening” is a principle of progress to the degree that it already involves and promotes a certain reduction of violence, but amongst the elements of the “reduction” that such an approach brings with it is also one which is specifically relative to a certain coherent historical necessity. “Weakness” in this sense is not “the absolute meaning” of history. To conceptualise such weakness is to seek to reduce violence by explicitly recognising the intrinsically interpretative character, rather than the absolute truth, of one’s own position. Such recognition also involves the possibility that history need not necessarily unfold in a merely linear fashion, in a single emphatic and univocal emancipatory direction, but can develop in a manner that is more oblique, as it were.

Question: It sometimes seems as if your own approach leads to the idea that “salvation history” is more about the history of the survival of certain values and ideas than it is about the Christian conception of resurrection. But is it not the case that Christianity is intrinsically and insolubly bound up with the notion of personal salvation?

Vattimo: But I do not really believe in the idea of a transcendent God – the transcendence of God has always seemed to me to be a problem bequeathed by medieval Aristotelianism. The transcendence of God only takes on genuine significance only if we speak of the transcendence of the historical project of the future. The concept of the transcendental, on the other hand, has hitherto always been characterised by some essentially natural or rational structure: I believe only in salvation history. Is not the idea of individual salvation simply part and parcel of the occidental emphasis and insistence on the centrality of individuality, something that is entirely absent from the oriental tradition of thought? Of course, I am attracted by the idea that if there is such a thing as salvation, then I must somehow acknowledge this in a personal way, but basically I believe much more strongly in *apocatastasis*: the idea of a restorative “end” is more plausible than the claim that the soul could somehow quit the body in order to encounter and commune with the souls of other individuals somewhere else.

Question: Would Gianni Vattimo then describe himself as a Christian philosopher?

Vattimo: I have never had any doubt that the only true Christian philosophy that is genuinely practicable today would be the kind I have elaborated, for

a number of reasons that we have already touched upon. “Weak thought” is a secularisation of Christian thought which it does not relinquish but rather actualises: for this reason, I would define myself in Christian terms today in the sense of someone who has inherited the idea of *kenosis*, the idea of reducing the violence that is bound up with the claims to objectivity, and above all the idea of charity. Hermeneutics is a kind of thinking that displaces the idea of truth in favour of what Rorty calls “solidarity,” but I should prefer to describe as “charity.” We do not come to agreement with one another because we have discovered the objective truth. On the contrary, we say we have discovered truth when we have come to agreement with one another. It seems to me that there is now ample consensus about the fact that intersubjective understanding has come to replace the notion of objective truth, a consensus that stretches from the hermeneutic tradition to post-analytical philosophers like Rorty, and to thinkers such as Apel and Habermas.

In this sense I have always thought of myself as a Christian philosopher. But I was in Ecuador recently, as Vice President of the *Academia de la Latinitad*, and I witnessed interventions by indigenous individuals, speaking in their native languages to denounce colonial abuses. And in such situations I sometimes ask myself why I have so stubbornly refused to abandon the Church entirely. In other words, I ask myself if I do not have a positive theoretical duty to do so. Am I a Catholic simply because I read the Breviary every night? In reality I find I am bound to this tradition, and have never found any decisive arguments to relinquish it. And above all for personal reasons: my Catholic background and training has always given me an ability to “collect myself,” to avoid getting lost in the most diverse and various kinds of experience. And then I basically enjoy the company of priests. Finally, a large proportion of the terms and expressions I employ in speaking of philosophy themselves derive from the Bible: we must agree with Croce in that we cannot not call ourselves Christians, as it were. So yes, I am a Christian philosopher, and also, personally speaking, a Catholic, although I hardly go to Mass, partly not to scandalise my neighbours, partly because I don’t care for the Mass in the vernacular. I am perfectly aware that many of my reasons for not abandoning the Church are rather weak, and are personal rather than theoretical in character. In the course of a conversation which I once had with Habermas, in Istanbul, he complained that I only really adduced *ad hominem* type arguments – the ontology of actuality is a way of responding to the donation of being – and argued that our duty, as philosophers, is to furnish some kind of demonstration for our claims. But I do not have any strong theoretical reason to dismiss my motivations, which we could indeed call “sentimental” ones: why should God be geometrical rather than gracious and pleasing in character? It is true that I sometimes attack the Church for its authoritarian

approach, and hope that the Church will prove in future to be more open, more friendly and welcoming, and less metaphysical. I hope for a Church that will relinquish its claims to absolute truth: but in the meantime I feel I should continue to remain within it, struggling as best I can to reduce the sacrificial victim-character of the ritual and attempting to persevere as coherently as possible. The truth of myth, after all, lies in its perpetual re-elaboration, as Hans Blumenberg has tried to show.

Question: A principle which is surely close to the heart of Protestant hermeneutics ...

Vattimo: I have always felt myself to be more Catholic than Protestant in outlook because I have never believed that the Biblical text simply speaks for itself. From this point of view, the Catholic Church strikes me as more hermeneutical than the Protestant confessions, at least to the degree that the *sola scriptura* principle has involved a certain metaphysical objectivism.

Question: This brings us to the question of Christianity and Judaism. What is your relationship to Lévinas?

Vattimo: I was immediately captivated by Lévinas when I first began to read his *Totality and Infinity*, which was about thirty years ago now. The idea of the face of the Other has always appeared very Heideggerian to me. But there came a point when I started to think that while Lévinas certainly desired to quit metaphysics – which he defines as “ontology” – it was only to go backwards. The way in which he reduces everything to a personal relationship with God strikes me as highly problematic. And as for the commandments of a personal God, at least metaphysics used to offer arguments. And then what is the place of history in Lévinas? Here he resembles Derrida, another thinker who has no conception of history. We are always before God, and always within the same world, in an essentially vertical and immediate relationship. I wonder whether we would not have greater respect for “the Other” if we remembered that the other has parents and a family, is born in a certain place, is a product of a certain history. I can only explain this absence of history, characteristic of both thinkers, by the fact that they belong to a Kantian rather than Hegelian tradition of philosophy, and also by reference to a philosophical feature that I would describe as specifically Judaic: the Messiah has not yet arrived, and history is therefore nothing but the realm of expectation. The question that I repeatedly addressed to Derrida was this: if you say that the Other is the different, is the unexpected, why couldn't Hitler represent a manifestation of the Other, precisely by virtue of his absolute alterity, of the radically novel character of the

totalitarian regimes, and so on. Obviously, neither Derrida nor Lévinas could ever be suspected of the slightest sympathy for Nazism. Yet it is true, in principle, that if history is not scanned or interrogated in temporal terms, there is no direct way of getting any purchase on the universal, not even in the (weakened) form of a God who withdraws or who announces his coming. Derrida's perspective strikes me as still too Cartesian, even if it is a kind of overturned Cartesianism: he believed that this vertical and immediate relationship was always already the doubling of an other that always inevitably recedes from us. This is an inheritance of his phenomenological background, is a memory of the *epoche*. The approach resembles that of Merleau-Ponty who, at a certain point, at the end of the regressive movement of phenomenological analysis, can only finally exclaim: "C'est la vie!" and fails to draw out anything further. All these writers eschew all metaphysical description, but do so in favour of a sort of ironic romanticism which seems equally inadequate to me. Derrida's notion of the "trace" is certainly fascinating, just as Heidegger's etymological suggestions are fascinating, but in and of themselves they do not lead anywhere, unless they are understood as a characteristic feature of being which announces itself by withdrawing, and is capable of exposing and undoing the historical effects and expressions of metaphysical violence.

Question: Reiner Schürmann is a thinker who has interpreted Heidegger in a way that is similar to your own. His reflections on action and politics also reveal a close affinity with your most recent reflections.

Vattimo: Unfortunately, he has not fully succeeded in expressing his own thought. We have had many discussions, but his interpretation of Heidegger was dangerously dependent on the purely phenomenological approach. You only have to think of his insistence on the idea of archaeology: where does this lead? When he was younger Schürmann had studied Meister Eckhart very closely: one possible, and perhaps the most plausible, interpretation would emphasise the mystical rather than the practical consequences of his thought. Politically speaking, he was much further to the Left than I was (I remember seeing a televised interview with Toni Negri in which Schürmann's latest book, *Broken Hegemonies*, was emphatically visible in the background). Philosophically speaking, his thought appeared to me to represent a Christian version of the phenomenological *epoche*. It is hardly an accident, therefore, that the *Preface* to the Italian translation of his book on Heidegger was written by Gianni Carchia, who has always shown a distinct sympathy for the mystical tradition.

Question: You have mentioned Carchia, who was actually one of your students. In this regard, one is inevitably struck by the great variety of philo-

sophical approaches and professional choices adopted by so many of the individuals you have influenced.

Vattimo: One might seek an initial explanation for this in the fact that many people studied philosophy during the 1970s precisely in order to go on and engage professionally with other fields: at the time there were no university faculties specifically dedicated to subjects such as communication sciences, psychology, or sociology. So philosophy was often the best option even for those who had no intention of pursuing a professional career in the subject. And again, this was also part of the legacy of 1968, of the strong desire for political engagement and for a philosophical comprehension of the world that was so characteristic of that period.

Question: You interpret the path your own thought has taken in terms of an uninterrupted “ontology of actuality,” as a constantly readjusted response to the historical and political situation of a specific epoch. Is this interpretation a rationalisation after the event, or did it actually unfold in this way?

Vattimo: The idea of an ontology of actuality can certainly also be interpreted as a retrospective vision of my philosophical development. But it is equally true that if one considers the reasons which motivated my decision to study philosophy at the university, it is clear that it was not simply the specifically philosophical subject matter that attracted me, but also its connection with closely related questions of politics and religion. Politics as such, an interest in the contemporary world, has always been at the centre of my reflections, apart from one or two brief periods, one of which was the period of study that I spent in Germany. At that time I was not in a position to keep up with the Italian newspapers, which always arrived very late, and, curiously, I had also stopped going to Mass, almost as if there were an emphatic connection between politics and religion, a connection that I felt was entirely natural. Catholic sensibility in those years necessarily involved social and political commitment: and my reflections were a response to the characteristic political, cultural, and religious situations of the epoch.

Question: As a theoretical project, the “ontology of actuality,” announced at least fifteen years ago now, has come up against certain unexpected difficulties. To what extent does it represent a development of “weak thought,” and at what stage do think it stands today?

Vattimo: “Weak thought” is a philosophy which naturally tends to understand itself as an “ideology of an epoch”: once we have emancipated ourselves from an

eternal conception of being or from timeless Platonic ideas, how can we believe that our own theories will be able to claim eternal validity either? From this perspective, then philosophy can only become, in Foucault's famous expression, an "ontology of actuality." But the principal problem of a philosophy which would attempt to reconstruct the sites which define the present is to determine what constitutes its proper object. Heidegger has tried to describe the various ways in which being "happens" in a famous passage from his essay on *The Origin of the Work of Art*, but then goes on to ascribe a unique privilege to "poetry" in relation to all the others. He had resolved the problem very simply by speaking of the poets and the pre-Socratics, for he believed that there were certain inaugural words which opened up our own cultural tradition. I have become increasingly doubtful of this approach: many years ago, in collaboration with Marziano Guglielminetti, I had intended to publish an essay entitled "Montale – an Epochal Poet," a title which, to tell the truth, also made us smile and didn't mean very much to anyone but ourselves, but it was an attempt to produce a reading of the present couched in the same kind of terms as Heidegger. But the things about Heidegger which impress and fascinate me now are certainly not his readings of the poets or his interpretations of the pre-Socratics. I have asked myself how one can produce an ontology of actuality by taking language as a point of departure, but also by bringing in something beyond language. The real difficulty is to define the sites and forms of knowledge that represent the "objects" of an ontology of actuality. Such an ontology, as I see it, resembles a philosophical sociology, is a kind of return to Adorno, who was the first writer I wanted to study after finishing my doctoral work. But Adorno has a style and manner of writing which is impossible to imitate or continue, and cannot create a following. It is no accident that, for Adorno, the expression of philosophical reflection rather resembles a musical performance.

If there is such a thing as an ontology of actuality in my work, it is contained, paradoxically enough, in the articles which I have written for the newspapers. However, I have recently looked over the lectures on the idea of truth which I delivered a few years ago at Louvain, and this text may furnish the decisive basis for elaborating a book on the ontology of actuality.

Question: Whether in the lectures delivered at Louvain, or in books such as *Oltre l'interpretazione*, the way you divide the material in the various chapters suggests an attempt to furnish a map of the sites in which being presents itself: science, ethics, religion, art. There is no specific place for politics here – it looks as if politics can only be practised, but not thought in its own right?

Vattimo: Politics is something that can only be practised, rather than thought, because it is a kind of technique. Personally speaking, what could it mean to

pursue politics with the kind of inadequate technical preparation that I possess? In an age of specialisation, those who possessed a proper background in law, for example, were in a much better position to accomplish the things that I would have liked to do myself. In this connection, I wrote a little book to be published by Avana, which I rather jestingly entitled *Ecce comu*. The title is naturally an ironical reference to Nietzsche and his *Ecce homo*. The subtitle, “How one becomes what one is,” here signifies “How one (re-)becomes a communist.” In the administered world of today one can only pursue a politics of opposition on the margins, in accordance with a model I describe as anarcho-communist. And this problematic character of politics is reflected in turn in my own philosophical approach: I have yet to find a satisfactory solution to the question regarding the relationship between politics and my principal field of work as a philosopher. Moreover, I really know very little about what could count as a reflective and satisfactory form of politics: in the modern democracies everything comes down to the activities of individual politicians who offer their wares in the electoral market place, and this all turns political philosophy into a rather uninteresting enterprise. Basically, the only things left for us to reflect on now are the great issues of globalisation, of the relation between politics and economics, of “development” generally. In this connection, I am a pessimist, and during the last few years I have developed a political-ideological perspective that is decidedly hostile to the current ideology of development: the mechanism governing the appropriation of resources and the current diffusion of homologised forms of life makes me increasingly anxious for the future of humanity. The capitalism that lives off its own crises seems to offer no way out, and I have no faith in the ideology of economic “growth”: as I see things, it is imperative that we attempt to reduce rather than to increase the level of consumption, or at least our level of consumption. And nature itself cannot provide an appropriate framework or a satisfactory solution to the problem: I have always distrusted appeals to nature, not only as a normative concept, but also with respect to its supposedly expressive and productive character.

Question: The idea of reducing the claims and demands of our current forms of life in the name of a more sustainable kind of development may be compatible with the critical and pessimistic views of Nietzsche and Heidegger with regard to modernity, but certainly not with the idea that emancipation must be sought in seeing technology through to the end.

Vattimo: It is true that in some of my writings I have endorsed the idea of emancipation by inflating, rather than by reducing these claims and demands: if I own a single television, I believe it is the voice of God, if I own twenty

I am no longer so sure. And inflation, in this sense, has also always possessed a deflationary dimension: the rich are much less attached to money than the poor, the multiplication of the factors on which one is dependent in a sense leads to a reduction of dependence. My general perspective may have changed slightly in this respect, but I do not believe that the idea of reducing the demands of our current forms of life in and of itself implies any intrinsic opposition to further technological development. What it does mean is that, in accordance with the way in which being “gives itself” in our present situation, that the meaning of technology also changes. Technological possibilities become something that may be used for playful or non-instrumental purposes, rather than solely serving ends which are oriented to production: Marcuse, to mention only one example, used to defend the possibility of an ironical escape from the excesses of technological domination. In short, if there is an emancipatory path for humanity, I believe that it must be sought in a “weakening” that is also a kind of consummation and spiritualisation of experience: it is necessary to raise everything to the level of spirit. Or to borrow Heidegger’s words from *Being and Time*: “There is being, not beings, insofar as there is truth.” This means that beings are consummated in a process of symbolisation, of formal mediations of one kind or another: the only trajectory of emancipation that I can conceive of lies in a certain “diminution,” a diminution of our claims to identity, of our forms of life, and thus a reduction of violence. And this implies a diminution from the political point of view as well: my theory is one which encourages the progressive democratisation of society at every possible level.

Question: From hermeneutic philosophy to a book like *Ecce comu* – what is the connecting thread here?

Vattimo: Well, the connecting thread is still a red one. *Ecce comu* is above all a political text, but the connection with hermeneutics is very clear. One could argue, in fact, that hermeneutics as I have interpreted it effectively implied a kind of transformative Hegelian Marxism which contested any naturalistic conception of absolute principles and thus possessed a political vocation from the outset. When I became a Deputy in the European Parliament, in 1999, I hoped to apply this contestation of “absolutes” to the political domain, by insisting, for example, on the conventional character of laws, and on a democratic practice grounded in processes of coming to agreement, by seeking to break all those absolutisms which originally issue from the Vatican and end up buttressing the neo-liberal theory of the sovereignty of the market. My sympathy for Marxism derives, above all, from Marx’s claim that political economy is not a natural science, but a historical science whose task is to

examine structures that have been produced over time and can in principle be changed. There are therefore no such things as absolute economic laws.

And the political experience of Europe itself has convinced me that the society which is now being constructed at a global level is a society of universal control, of a world that is ever more tightly integrated in terms dictated solely by the “Washington consensus.” Hermeneutics, in and of itself, obviously cannot be translated into a particular political perspective which is definitive and valid for all time. But it draws our attention to a world where truth is an “event,” is constituted by different encounters, by dialogue and conversation, in short a world which is the very opposite of a global order based on an Enron-style control of communication. For this reason, I have returned to the notion of universal “proletarianisation,” now interpreting the latter in terms of processes of communication. We may not be starving here in Europe, but we might well end up subjected to a form of proletarianisation through the possibility of an absolute control over our means of communication, our thoughts, our bodies. The society of relative material affluence which we have inhabited for many years now is clearly no longer one where people die of hunger, but it is a one where we can die of control: all of this has prompted me to return specifically to the critical and negative message of Marx, to the idea of a growing proletarianisation that is encouraged by the increasing homologisation of the structures of communication and information. In addition, we see how the process of globalisation is also producing growing inequality, a growing division between those who have very little and those who already have more than enough. At a certain point I began to believe that a communism “corrected” in the light of “weak thought” would no longer inevitably result in a form of Stalinism. An absolutist, i.e. metaphysical, Marxism is objectively dangerous from the perspective of the social order as well, and that is why we need “weak thinking” to mount a critique of the industrial model, and of the western economic model in general, which had also been imposed, for reasons of war, on the policies of the Soviet state. The idea that the communist model had also been “distorted” by the fact that it had to defend itself against the hostile intentions of the capitalist states, and the idea that the construction of an enormously powerful Soviet Union also sprang from the necessity of resisting Nazism, have led me to re-examine the communist message. We can say, if we like, that even the Leninist definition of communism corresponds to precisely what any good western democrat also desires, namely a process of economic development under popular, i.e. effectively democratic, control. Today, by contrast, we live in a society which has almost nothing in common with the original Soviet model but is increasingly “electrified” in character, that is, largely dedicated to economic development even if it damages people’s lives, even if it undermines the possibility of participating in power. I had

originally intended to provide my book *Ecce comu* with the subtitle “A March through the Opposition.” I found myself driven further and further to the Left by the fact that everyone else was moving to the Right: when I now look back at my arguments from the electoral campaign of 1999, I discovered that they were the same as those of 2004, except that the *Partito democratico* had lost the “S” for socialism in the meantime.

Question: Would you describe yourself as a liberal Marxist?

Vattimo: To be honest, I am more of a wrecked Marxist – what really fascinates me is communism as a social ideal, and one I believe is reasonable. So I don’t really wish to pretend I am a Marxist, but my own political conclusions are analogous to such a position. One of my slogans from the campaign of 2004 was “Real communism is dead, long live ideal communism!”

Question: Would you say that hermeneutics still constitutes something like the common language of contemporary philosophy? And if you believe it is, what developments would you expect, or wish to encourage, in the hermeneutic tradition? And what do think about the “Iconic Turn” which some claim has now succeeded the “Linguistic Turn” that was identified by Rorty?

Vattimo: The idea of an “Iconic Turn” appears plausible to me, but I have not worked on this area very much. In the wake of Heideggerean hermeneutics I think we can see the emergence of an intensified Hegelianism, one which concentrates on the domain of “objective spirit,” on the construction of forms of possible agreement, on the growth of communicative harmony, rather than any return to emphatic claims. In your book on the subject of beauty, you refer to nature as something we have been too ready to forget, and which you defend specifically with reference to the image and the idea of beauty.² This may be so, but in the last analysis I find it hard to believe. I think that we are actually moving towards a condition in which everything increasingly reveals itself as history, but a history that is finally one that we make! These are precisely the motivating insights of Marxism itself: there are no objective structures which intrinsically constrain us, and all we can do is to encourage the dissolution of such structures. True history is a history of spirit, a history of the spiritualisation of our individual and collective existence, a history which means, for example, that immediacy, and thus “the natural” too, is more and more thoroughly sublimated, more and more intensely transmuted onto the level of symbols. In this connection, I remember a discussion with Umberto Eco in Bologna in

² F. Vercellone, *Oltre la bellezza*, Bologna: il Mulino, 2008.

1998–99. He continued to maintain that there is such a thing as reality, that we always bump into in the end, and I replied that while we do indeed bump into reality, this does not mean that it must be treated as “the Absolute,” and that I wish to destroy this wall which continues to create the bumps on my head. My rereading of Marxism is simply a practical expression of an approach I had already found in Gadamer, in his essay on “The Philosophical Foundations of the Twentieth Century,” where he says that we must go back and reread Hegel in terms of his philosophy of “objective spirit,” and that the real deficiency of Hegel’s thought lies in his residual Cartesianism, in the supposed self-transparency of “absolute spirit.” But my conception of spiritualisation, an ever more intense construction of agreed truths, of truths born out of the event of social interaction, seems to represent a kind of Hegelian Marxism which also captures the essence of philosophical hermeneutics. Why is it that not all philosophers today share such a hermeneutic perspective? Because they are dominated by capitalism, that is, are still captivated by an objectivistic and metaphysical *forma mentis* which can only favour those in power. If there is any objective necessity, this is claimed precisely by those who wield power. No weak individual or group in history has ever believed that the world is “in order,” that there is any objective form of rationality.

Question: Nature has always been excluded from the domain of objective spirit. Do you too not believe that if nature were finally to enter into objective spirit, this would effect a very significant change? If nature itself were regarded as less hostile, indeed as favouring – as recent developments of evolutionary theory seem to suggest – the creation of cooperative models, rather than the Darwinian “struggle for life,” it might be possible to conceive different models of science, even a “softer” model of technology.

Vattimo: I agree with some of what you say. We do not have to think of nature solely in the terms defined by the Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. The real problem is how we can relate all this to our knowledge of nature, or enter into dialogue with the empirical sciences, without readdressing the question of the very concept of nature, and thus also the historicity, the historical structures which come to define how we think about nature. But I am sympathetic to a discourse which involves an essentially hermeneutic approach to nature, and, at the same time, a certain “naturalisation” of social dialogue. I am in complete agreement with you here. I can envisage a much less aggressive form of medicine, for example, of a science which is less predatory in its approach to nature. Yet we must not forget that all this would require a fundamental change in the social order, and a transformation in the structure of scientific research, which would then no longer depend solely on

an immediate emphasis on productivity or on a predominantly economic logic. And the communist ideal also ultimately implied the idea of a reconciliation with nature. So we may indeed welcome a certain re-naturalisation of hermeneutics, as long as it comes about through a transformation of our way of thinking the natural sciences themselves and the relationship between technology and nature. And this is precisely what I had in mind when I spoke of Heidegger's *Gestell*, or concept of "enframing," in terms of electronic technology – a technology capable of establishing a form of communication that was no longer exclusively mono-directional, from the centre to the periphery, but rather bi-directional in character.

Question: Is it possible to trace the extent to which "weak thought" has enjoyed a diagnostic as well as a merely philosophical success? Are you able to indicate, after the event, where you feel you grasped the time appropriately, and where you feel you failed to realise your objectives?

Vattimo: Well, in retrospect, I think that I placed too much faith in technology and its emancipatory possibilities, a perspective that may be explained as a kind of reaction against the pessimistic outlook of Adorno. I felt that I had to settle accounts with the way in which both Adorno and Heidegger had effectively excommunicated technological society in general. In this sense, perhaps, my opposition to the Frankfurt School perspective here led me to overemphasise the event of being harboured within the technological *Gestell*, which, as I saw it, possessed an emancipatory potential. When I prepared the second edition of my book *La società trasparente*, a certain return to communism and the political critique of contemporary society had already begun to make itself felt. In this respect, I confess that I remain a metaphysical thinker, in the sense that I conceived the ontology of actuality as an attempt to disentangle the matter, to return to the principle, this time political, from which everything derives.

Question: It is now exactly thirty years since the publication of Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition*, a work which exercised an enormous influence at the time. In certain respects, it is also a book which seems to furnish a fundamental premise for the idea of "weak thought"...

Vattimo: There was initially great enthusiasm for the claims which Lyotard advanced in this book, particularly for the notion of a plurality of language games, for the demise of grand narratives, i.e. for an unregulated society which obliges you to become a Nietzschean "Overman" since those who are unable to invent their own interpretation of the world would cease to

matter. The idea still seems valid to me, except that the distorting effect of technology, as far as emancipation is concerned, is a more difficult problem than I imagined: this is basically why I have become a communist. The title of one of my essays, “From weak thought to the thought of the weak,” effectively expresses this fundamental problem, and alludes to the fact that “weak thought” was too ready to believe that the event of being already provided us with paths of emancipation, whereas such paths are still to be discovered. The final lecture which I delivered at the University of Turin, on 14 October 2008, was dedicated to the question “From Dialogue to Conflict”: philosophical discoveries are not independent of the actual present. And, of course, so many things have already transpired in the meantime, there have been the bombings in Iraq, the rediscovery, as the Right has taught us, of the importance of violence in history, and so forth. The limit of “weak thought” lay in a certain Heideggerean and over-tolerant historicism which has been corrected in the light of political experience. Thus “weak thought” has now become “the thought of the weak”: hermeneutics can be realised through communism, but communism, in turn, does not emerge naturally, but must be constructed. At the beginning, “weak thought” involved the hope of a historical transformation that would naturally be induced by the technological transformation. Now I would delete the “naturally” here: the conditions for emancipation have certainly been made possible by technological transformation, but emancipation is by no means necessary or inevitable. This is basically the idea of Marcuse when he argued that “surplus repression” could be eliminated in principle because we were already in a position, technologically speaking, to live a more liberated life.

Question: Until a few years ago, the philosophical points of reference in your lectures were principally Heidegger and Nietzsche. Today they have become Hegel or Marx. Is it true to say that you are now increasingly concerned with the problem of synthesis?

Vattimo: It is a question of assuming political responsibility. Political experience has never been a matter of indifference to me, but has been very important in terms of one’s responsibility for philosophical thought. Why is the affair of Heidegger’s involvement with Nazism of such interest to me? Obviously, his political choices cannot possibly be endorsed, but what is interesting is the fact that he felt increasingly claimed by the political, instead of simply continuing to theorise the question of “authenticity” and “inauthenticity.” This is the moment of the Heidegger’s “turn,” the transition from *Being and Time*, in which he concentrated upon the problem of “world,” to *The Origin of the Work of Art*, in which he speaks in the plural of different historical worlds, and

of historical forms of humanity. And Pareyson himself, when he expressed a sense of intellectual vocation that was ultimately religious rather than purely existentialist in character, also turned to the question of history, although in his case it was a matter of the ideal eternal history of the original fall of God in creating a world in the first place. I feel I am following in his footsteps to the extent that his mode of expression appears essentially allegorical to me: the occurrence of evil, as I see it, is the birth of metaphysics and of proprietary objectivism. My growing sympathy with a Hegelian-Marxian, and less Heideggerean, approach basically corresponds to the experience which lay behind Heidegger's own "turn." I do not feel I am someone who can somehow stand outside history. Those who believe they can stand outside history do so because they already enjoy a certain position of privilege. In this sense, I believe I must stand on the side of a thinker like Heidegger who acknowledged historical commitments, however short-sighted and compromising they were.

Question: And what is the role of Christianity in this context? How does it relate to this Hegelian-Marxian perspective?

Vattimo: I would rephrase your question in a different way. Why, in the last analysis, do I feel an obligation to take the part of the weak? Certainly not because I believe, in some evangelical way, that the weak already possess the truth. I endorse this position, rather than another, for historical reasons, perhaps because I was born the way I was. For I have never thought of nature in terms of natural law. Thus I do not believe that I must respect my neighbour through an appeal to nature. If I do so, it is only because of a certain history, because I have been formed by Christianity, and the only universal I know is, as Hegel would say, the ethical-religious-historical universal which is my own. In short, I cannot reject the idea of participating in history, and I do so from the perspective of my Christian background and heritage, in the sense that "I cannot not describe myself as Christian."

(Translated from Italian by Nicholas Walker)

Gianni Vattimo
University of Turin
gianni.vattimo@unito.it

Federico Vercellone
University of Turin
federico.vercellone@unito.it

Luca Savarino
University of East Piemonte
luca.savarino@gmail.com